



# Spring feasts in Cyprus

# Shrove Thursday

- ▶ As in the old days, the Carnival festive season officially starts on **Shrove Thursday**. On this day the people of Limassol gather at various locations in the town's historic center, where they celebrate the traditional season customs, such as the consumption of meat (tsiknomata in Greek), serenading, and makeshift parties.



Although the **Carnival** festive season has been chronicled in Cyprus since medieval times (under the Franks and Venetians), in Limassol it began growing spectacularly in more modern times, specifically at the start of British rule (late 19th century). This was no coincidence, as it was due to the economic progress of the town during this time period, but also to the special traits that the town's inhabitants developed over time: their outgoing and enthusiastic nature, their inclination towards the arts, satire, dance and song, as well as their love of partying and having fun.



- ▶ The main characteristics of the **Carnival** festive season are the consumption of meat and wine, satire, dancing and singing - particularly serenades - as well as the masked revelers and costumes. The carnival events, and the merry-making in the taverns, nightclubs and hotels, peak on the two weekends. It is on these two weekends that the children's parade as well as the main carnival parade are held, with the participation of thousands of carnival-goers, locals and foreigners



- ▶ The **Easter** period coincides with the beginning of the spring period and a number of ancient customs of the persecution of winter, resurrection of nature from hibernation and welcoming spring were adjusted and connected to the Christian worship and the customary cycle of Pascha from the Raising of Lazarus until the Pascha Sunday.



**Easter** is the most important religious celebration in the Greek Christian Orthodox Church. The date of the Greek Orthodox Easter is based on a modified Julian calendar. Easter in the Western Churches use a different calendar, the Gregorian. This is why Orthodox and Catholic Easters are often not on the same day.

During Holy Week (the week of Easter Sunday) there is a buzz in the air of church-going, shopping for new clothes, and baking. The smell of the traditional Cypriot cooking with special pasties and sweets baked just for Easter Sunday, combined with the heady scent of orange blossoms in the air and the wonderful chanting which emanates from the churches, creates an atmosphere of expectation and apprehension - a feeling that something good is just around the corner. This feeling which is difficult to put into words is also felt by many visitors – even if they are not Christian by faith.

- ▶ Thursday of Holy Week is when the wonderful aromas begin to drift out into the streets as this is traditionally the day when housewives start preparing the 'flaounes' (small loaves made of flour, eggs, cheese, mint and sometimes raisins). These are shaped into triangles, sprinkled with sesame seeds then baked in the oven, 'paskies' (small meat pies), and 'koulouria' (biscuits made of milk, flour, spices and sugar).



Eggs are hard boiled and dyed in preparation for the traditional festive games on Sunday.





On the Friday morning before Easter (Good Friday or “Great Friday” as it is called in Greek) families carrying flowers, gather in all the churches around the island. The flowers are collected and carried by young girls to decorate the ‘Epitaphios’ during the church service. The Epitaphios is the icon which depicts Christ after he has been removed from the cross, lying supine, as his body is being prepared for burial.

On Friday evening a solemn service is held in all the churches on the island where the decorated Epitaphios is carried into the streets, for a procession, then returned to the church for the continuation of the service.



- ▶ On Easter Saturday two services are held in the church – one early in morning and another at 11 p.m. Before the 11 p.m. service, which is called “The service of the Resurrection,” church bells sound out in all the villages and towns of Cyprus calling everyone to come and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Huge bonfires are lit in the churchyards. Every person carries a large unlit lambada (candle) and there is a heightened anticipation in the air.



- ▶ The church services start at 11 pm and few minutes before midnight, the lights in the church are switched off and the choir chants the story of three women (myrrh bearers) who arrived at Christ's tomb only to find it empty. The lights are switched on again at midnight precisely and the priest calls the congregation to "take from his candle the light which never dies." The flame is passed from person to person until everyone is holding a lit candle. The ceremony then continues outside the church for around thirty minutes, after which, the priest returns inside again to begin the special Sunday liturgy for another two and a half to three hours. The Holy Fire (in Greek "Holy Light") is described by Orthodox Christians as a miracle that occurs every year at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on Great Saturday, or Holy Saturday, on the eve of the Orthodox Easter.

- ▶ After the 'Christos Anesti' chants (Christ is Risen) most of the congregation leave to celebrate with family and friends by watching the firework displays which are held outside most churches, and to enjoy a meal of the traditional Cypriot trachana (a creamy, savoury soup of wheat and yogurt) or magiritsa (a creamy soup with a tangy lemon twist and pieces of meat). A part of the congregation stays till the end of the service (around 2:30 in the morning) and receives Holy Communion.



The eggs which were hardboiled and dyed on Thursday are now used in a game where they are hit against each other and whoever is left with an un-cracked egg is the 'winner'. The breaking of the eggs is symbolic of Christ breaking free from the tomb from where he arose after death.



Easter Sunday is when the celebrations really begin. Feasts of souvla (large pieces of lamb or pork, or chicken are cooked on an open charcoal fire), salads, cakes, sweets, and alcoholic beverages are also on the menu! The smell of outdoor barbeques infuses the whole island! Lamb is the main traditional Easter meal as the early Christians adopted this custom from the ancient Jews who sacrificed lambs for their Passover celebrations.

